FAQs about Response Rates and Bias in Online Course Evaluations

- **Are the course ratings lower when evaluations are done on line rather than in class?**
  - There was no systematic tendency for course ratings to be either higher or lower with online data collection at any of the institutions studied. (See Reference List that follows.)

- **Are response rates lower for online evaluations than for in-class evaluations?**
  - At all five institutions where most research has been conducted, response rates are lower when course evaluations are completed on line as compared to in class.
  - In-class response rates are typically between 60% and 80%.

- **Are course ratings biased because only the students who don’t like a course respond on line?**
  - At all universities, including McGill, there was no bias due to the method of data collection. In other words, students with a range of opinions about a course complete the evaluations. There were no differences in the average ratings or their distributions between online and in-class evaluations.

- **Why not stay with in-class evaluations to get a higher response rate?**
  - Although in-class response rates are higher, good response rates alone do not ensure the validity of the results. In general, lower response rates do not necessarily result in less representative responses.

- **What are the advantages of an online system?**
  - Enhanced data analysis and communication
    - rapid turnaround time for professors to get results; hours vs. months after submitting grades
    - standardized reporting functions available within units and University-wide
    - supports custom analyses
    - facilitates dissemination of results
    - provides secure archiving
  - An online system offers every student equal access to the evaluation process
    - every student enrolled in the course has a voice; missing one class does not silence a student
  - Improved administrative efficiencies
    - easy to standardize and customize forms
    - reduced workload for administrative staff in the academic units
    - lower costs
  - Improved data quality
    - increased quantity and quality of comments
    - increased anonymity for students
  - Reduced environmental impact
    - reduces paper consumption by eliminating paper questionnaires, computer response sheets and reports to professors, unit heads, and students
Reference List

McGill University

- Analyzed data from 93 courses in 4 departments from 2005 and 2003/2004
- Looked at instances when the same instructor taught the same course and compared online evaluations (2005) and in-class paper evaluations (either 2003 or 2004)
- There was no significant difference on the mean rating, shape of distribution or standard deviation for any of the courses.
- There was no systematic increase or decrease in the confidence intervals of the means.
- There was no systematic tendency for results to be either higher or lower with online data collection.


Brigham Young University

- 74 course sections evaluated both online and paper; there was no evidence that lower response rates resulted in lower ratings.
- Online ratings appear to be less susceptible to response rate bias


Cornell University

- Study in the Department of Economics; sample of 7 professors who each taught the same course over a three year period (total of 29 evaluations); in two cases the course was taught twice in the same semester, evaluated once online and once in-class.
- The online response rates were lower but they did not affect the average evaluation scores.


CSU, Northridge

- 16 instructors teaching the same course twice per semester; one evaluated online, the other in-class
- There was no overall effect for data collection method; when separate analyses were performed, there was a difference for only one instructor.
- Modest grade incentive (0.25%) did have an impact on response rate without influencing results.


Unnamed southeastern university

- Data from 66 courses from 5 disciplinary areas that were randomly assigned to online or paper.
- There was no effect for the method of data collection, nor was there any interaction between the method and the disciplinary area.
